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Opening Dialogue

Story by **TIM OBERMILLER**

As a student at St. Mary's College in Maryland, Robert Erlewine planned to become a lawyer. It wasn't until he read the German philosopher Nietzsche that he felt pulled on a different path.

"It forced me into all sorts of roads of inquiry," says Erlewine, who joined Illinois Wesleyan's faculty as an assistant professor of religion in 2006. "And also ruined my chance of ever making money," he adds with a laugh.



Assistant Professor of Religion Robert Erlewine (Photo by Marc Featherly)

Erlewine's latest road of inquiry led him to the publication of *Monotheism and Tolerance: Recovering a Religion of Reason*. Published this year by Indiana University Press, the book has drawn praise from several scholars in his field. Leora Batnitzky of Princeton University called it "an important corrective to recent discussions of the relation between monotheism and tolerance."

Erlewine says the book was inspired by his sense of frustration with the way religion is now discussed and considered. Central to his book's thesis is the concept of tolerance, especially as it relates to the world's major monotheistic religions: Christianity, Judaism and Islam.

It has long been recognized that a lack of tolerance among religious followers towards the beliefs of others often leads to exclusion and violence. On the other hand, expecting those followers to show tolerance by not insisting on the superiority of their particular religion "is just not realistic," Erlewine says.

"With the modern concept of tolerance, there is an insistence that all religions must recognize that other religions are their equals, and they have no special claim," he says. "In reality, part of the nature of monotheistic religions is to claim an elect status, so denying that creates barriers to dialogue with those who belong to these traditions."

Erlewine's book examines a wide spectrum of religious and philosophical thought over the centuries to find ways that religion and tolerance can be reconciled in more realistic and satisfying ways. He is particularly interested in Moses Mendelssohn and Hermann Cohen, two

Enlightenment-inspired thinkers who “don’t curb the notion of election but rather transfigure and transform it in ways that don’t diminish the stature of others,” he says.

That these philosophers lived long ago actually works in their favor, says Erlewine. Modern secular thought holds that certain “assumptions of religions make them intellectually invalid, or at least beyond the reach of rational discourse.” In contrast, these earlier thinkers did not dismiss religious thought, but rather engaged in its premises “with honest intellectual rigor.”

Erlewine regards Cohen’s writings as “particularly relevant to issues we face today.” He first discovered Cohen while in graduate school at Rice University. “From the very beginning, I knew something very profound was going on. The more I’ve studied him, the more I’ve realized just how sophisticated his position is.” Cohen’s works, many of which remain untranslated from the original German, “are only now getting the appreciation they deserve,” Erlewine says.

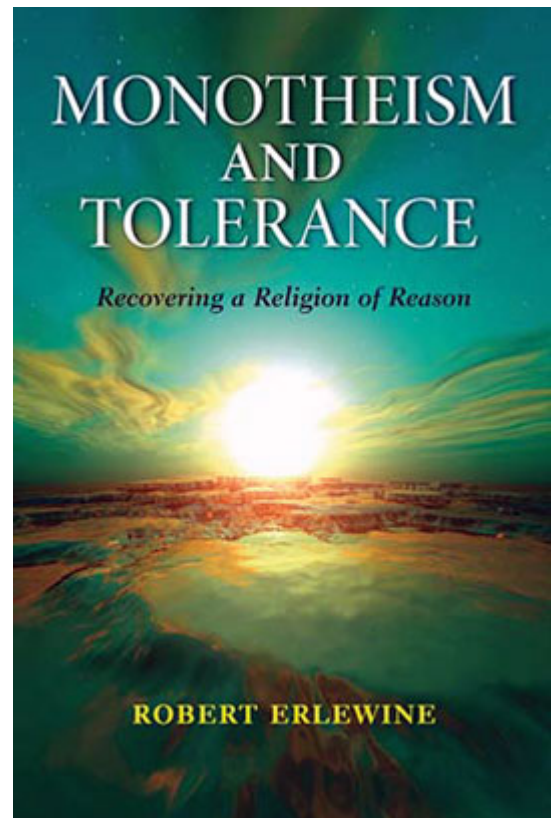
Writing in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Cohen developed his concept of “ethical monotheism” by carefully tracking the evolution of Judaism through its texts and history.

“He’s trying to show how an idea that was brought into existence and developed by a particular religious community can be rational, true and therefore of universal significance,” says Erlewine.

Cohen uses the “history of philosophy and Judaism to read Jewish holy texts in terms of their highest possible ethical meanings,” Erlewine explains. “This allows him to maintain such core features of monotheism, like notions of election and a world historic mission, while also being able to sculpt them so as to be amenable to life in modern, liberal societies.”

Cohen does not, however, embrace tolerance as we often employ the term today, Erlewine says. He retains the primacy of the Jewish worldview but binds it to “an ethical responsibility for those who do not share those beliefs, such that the refusal to commit violence becomes an essential component of bearing witness to the truth of Judaism.

“This is what makes Cohen so relevant today,” Erlewine continues. “What he did using the sources of Judaism could be applied to other religious traditions. Philosophy can offer new ways to interpret the sacred texts of those traditions, and new ways to explain one’s values and commitments to those outside of a particular tradition.”



In his new book, Erlewine examines how philosophy can offer new ways to interpret sacred texts and traditions.

Erlewine sees promise in this approach as a means to improve “the polarizing atmosphere that now exists between secularists and the religious that has led to both sides hardening their positions and moving further and further apart.

“Really, the idea behind this book is ‘How can we get secular and religiously conservative thinkers to speak to one another? Indeed, how can we get them speaking in a common language?’ These thinkers from the past show us ways these tensions might be softened, or even made productive, in the modern world.”

In writing his book, Erlewine “drew a lot of inspiration from classroom discussions with students.” Among his courses is a Gateway Colloquium for first-year students titled “Facing Evil.”

For the course, students read “The Grey Zone,” an essay by Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi about a group of Jewish prisoners who assisted guards in shepherding their victims to the gas chambers and disposing of their bodies. Prisoners who refused were killed on the spot while those who cooperated were granted special privileges.

“That piece, and others I assign for the course, break down our customary ways of thinking — between us and them, between the good guys and the bad guys, between the evil and the innocent.

“The point I’m trying to get across” says Erlewine, “is that there are no easy answers out there. And I think the best thing a liberal arts education can do is make you question the easy answers and consider issues more deeply, with appreciation of their true complexity.

“I hope all my classes make my students’ lives more complicated,” he adds, “but in a good way.”